DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 126 842 HE 008 164

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TITLE Multiple Perspectives Evaluation: A Strategy for Dealing with Conflict Pressures.
PUB DATE May 76
NOTE 13p.; Paper presented at the Annual meeting of the Association for Institutional Research (Los Angeles, California, May 1976)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Conflict Resolution; Fine Arts; *Higher Education; *Input Output Analysis; *Institutional Research; *Multidimensional Scaling; *Program Evaluation

ABSTRACT

Described is the Empire State Office of Research and Evaluation multiple perspective strategy for evaluation of academic programs. The uncommon Studio Arts Program in New York City is used as a model. This program is politically as well as educationally important to the institution, which introduces internal and external pressures on the research. These are discussed along with the design, which included a variety of qualitative and quantitative methods and the policy decision outcomes of the evaluation. (Author)

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ED126842

MULTIPLE PERSPECTIVES EVALUATION

A Strategy for Dealing With Conflicting Pressures

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
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May 1976

HE008164

Paper prepared for 1976 Annual meeting of the Association for Institutional Research, Los Angeles.

Evaluation of academic programs--their processes, orientations, objectives, products, and impact--is a recent and important dimension of institutional research. Given the increasing scrutiny under which postsecondary institutions operate, educational evaluation is an almost natural outgrowth of the descriptive studies and cost analyses that have characterized the field. However, much evaluation to date relies upon single or at best dual perspectives on effectiveness. Given the growing recognition of various interests both internal and external to postsecondary education, this traditional strategy for evaluation is insufficient. Needed are designs that provide a rich variety of data in response to the multiple perspectives and pressures (Campbell and Fiske, 1959; Webb et al, 1965; Sieber, 1973.) This paper outlines such a design by describing briefly the Program Effectiveness and Related Cost (PERC) framework developed at Empire State College in conjunction with some other institutions. The paper then illustrates how the multiple perspectives evaluation strategy proved effective in an examination of a complex, innovative, Studio Arts Semester in New York City.

Program Effectiveness and Related Costs (PERC)

PERC began three years ago as a project to develop ways of linking assessment of effectiveness to cost analyses. Jointly sponsored by the Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education, Exxon and Empire State College, PERC now involves four cooperating institutions: Hampshire College, Amherst, Mass.; Northland College, Ashland, Wisc.; State University of New York at Plattsburgh, and University of Wisconsin-Green Bay. The framework looks seriously at relationships between outcomes and costs for students, faculty, and programs in an attempt to learn "what kinds of students change in what ways following what kinds of educational experiences

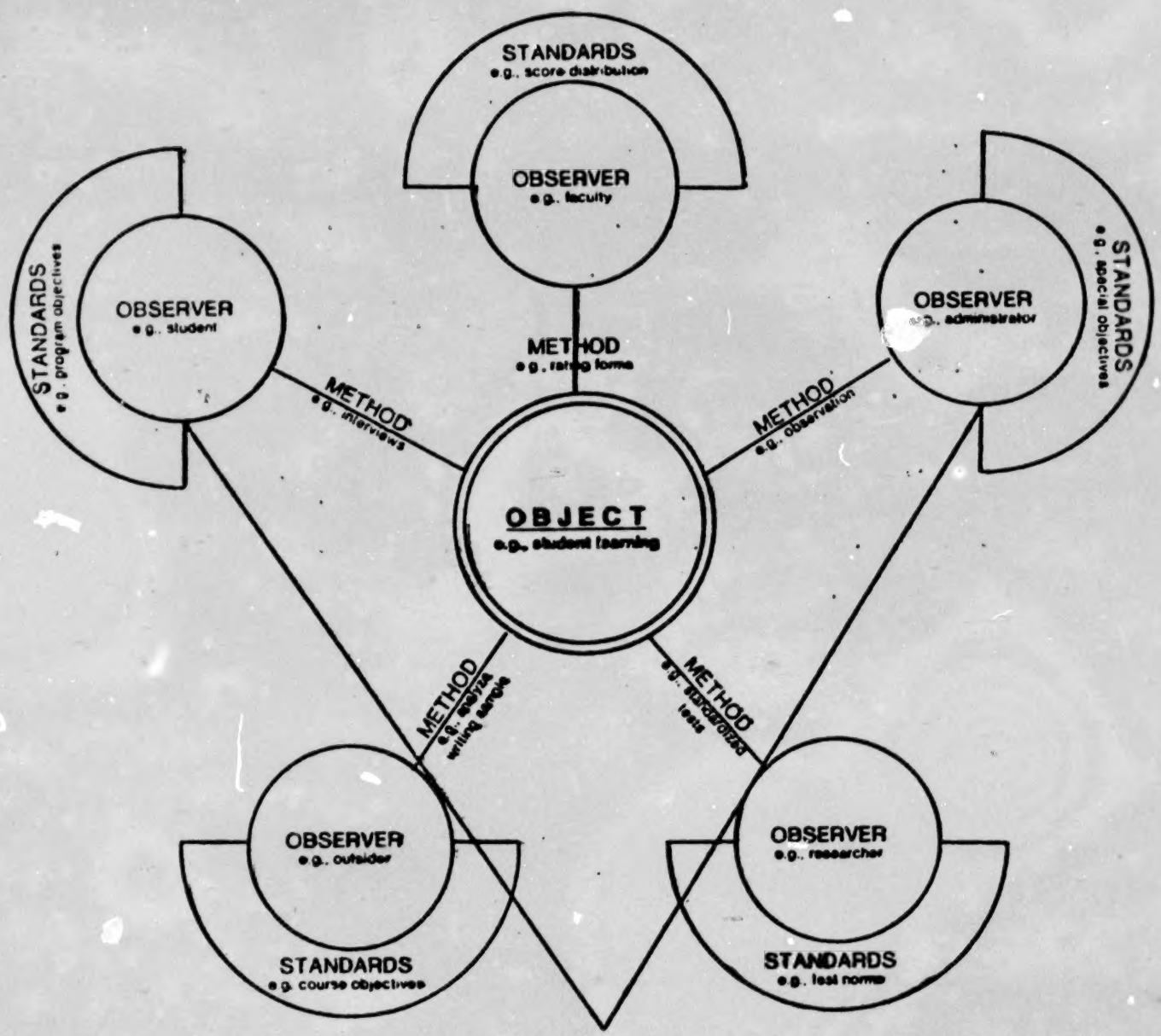
and at what costs?" The PERC framework has several important features (discussed in Palola et al, 1975; Palola et al, 1976) but the one that is most pertinent for his paper is the multiple perspectives strategy.

The multiple perspectives strategy developed for the PERC framework is shown in Figure 1. It contains three key ideas: first, student learning is the focus of PERC evaluations, and thus its placement at the center of the figure; second, multiple persons make observations of student learning utilizing various ways of knowing and ways of evaluating. This rich composite of diverse information is critical to the pluralistic notion of evaluation presented here; and third, an independent or neutral research and evaluation staff synthesizes all data types and prepares useful reports for different audiences. Reports tailor-made to audience interests maximizes communication and program improvement based on research data. PERC's aim is clearly to enhance executive decision-making capabilities.

A few more details. An important concern of PERC is to utilize a variety of data collection methods. Student learning and growth is a complex process, not yet well understood, so reliance upon a single method of data collection is risky. For example, test scores provide, according to many, a reasonable estimate of cognitive achievement. But, at best, tests look at student mastery of content. Better also to find other methods of data collection. Interviews, rating forms, survey instruments, content analysis, observation and tests are all important tools for obtaining a full picture of what is happening to students. Note that this means use of qualitative as well as quantitative techniques. The aim is to develop chains of evidence of where program impacts have occurred.

Multiple observers and multiple standards are key components to a multiple perspectives strategy. While faculty traditionally assess student learning and

Figure 1. PERC'S MULTIPLE PERSPECTIVES STRATEGY



ORE

Synthesizes data and prepares reports for different AUDIENCES

e.g., students, faculty, administrators, accreditors, parents, state officials, national agencies

program effectiveness, students and others including educational researchers also can provide richness to an evaluation. Since effectiveness is often in the eyes of the beholder, multiple observers applying their own standards are important to informed decision-making.

Overall, the multiple perspectives approach posits certain common evaluations that will be reflected in the various research techniques as well as certain unique judgments that may reflect the particular vantage points and knowledge of a given evaluator. This approach conceptualizes the learning/teaching process as complex, interactive, and unique but also patterned. As a result, for certain kinds of students working with certain kinds of faculty, there ought to be identifiable common outcomes. The multiple perspective approach should be able to reveal them. The researchers task is then to present them in understandable and convincing ways to the variety of audiences.

An Illustration: Evaluating the Studio Arts Semester in New York

The Empire State College Studio Arts Semester (SAS) in New York was created in 1975 to provide an opportunity for college undergraduates from throughout the State University of New York to spend a semester in the arts capital of North America. The program is designed for serious, professionally-oriented students and allows them to immerse themselves in their media.

The elements of the program are simple. Students live in the City and work in a large loft space connected with the Westbeth complex on the edge of Greenwich Village. All have a personal studio area in the loft where they pursue their art interests. In addition, there are several seminars in courses at such City programs as the Chambers Street Sculptors Workshop, Westbeth Graphic Workshop, and the Baldwin Pottery Workshop. Others do apprentice work with practicing artists. However, the most important dimension of the SAS is regularly

scheduled critiques in which a professional artist/critic meets individually with each student and offers encouragement, suggestions, help, or alternatives. The sessions are often intense and test the confidence and mettle of every student. Each artist/critic (a total of six) makes 3-4 visits per semester.

Empire State College has taken program evaluation seriously since its founding in 1971. PERC looks at the entire College. Thus, it was not unusual when the Office of Research and Evaluation was asked to conduct a study on SAS during its initial term. However, there were several pressures under which the staff members worked.

Decisions were pending about SAS personnel. It was thus necessary to clarify ORE's role. The position taken by ORE was that personnel decisions were not part of its work. Thus the evaluation stuck to student learning outcomes and the actual operation of the Studio Arts Program. A second pressure arose from the multiple funding base for the program. Each contributor held certain interests and these were crucial to them as well as to the success of the Studio Arts Program. Third, relationships between the students home campus and SAS was key. Some art department chairmen played a major role in determining which students participated. Students often asked about, or openly criticized, admissions criteria and the general level of development of students admitted to the painting program. These were some of the pressures playing on SAS and ORE at the time of the evaluation study.

Six methods of data collection were used. The most basic was gleaning available files on enrolled students to discover such things as age, sex, and home institution. This task might have been easier if files had existed but the combination of a new program and unclear administrative procedures led to a dearth of accurate information.

The second technique was personal interviews with students at the Westbeth loft. The interviews sought to learn why students enrolled, whether the program fit

neatly into their long-term plans, how they were "using" the City, what the SAS provides that is not available on campus, perceived benefits, and problems with the program. All students were interviewed.

A third technique was interviews with the Program Coordinator who is a practicing New York artist and three artist/critics. These conversations focused especially on SAS strengths and weaknesses.

A fourth aspect of the methodology was phone interviews with Advisory Board members. The Advisory Board consists of art faculty throughout SUNY, ESC administrators, and personnel representing SUNY's Central staff, who helped create the SAS and are responsible for its progress.

The fifth technique was a short anonymous questionnaire which utilized open-ended questions about student goals, problems, learnings, and the like. Most students (90%) completed the form. Also, students kept logs of their work activities and reactions to the program.

Sixth, the research team spent four days and two evenings in non-participant observation of students working, interacting, and undergoing critique. While invisibility is impossible, it seems fair to suggest that we were not prominent in the students' minds. We were simply visitors to ignore or talk with depending on time, mood, or circumstance.

Another aspect of the study was a cost analysis. This compared SAS total and per student costs with all-College figures.

Overall, the multiple methods and sources provided a rich melange of information about the Empire Studio Arts Semester. This was put in an initial report on July 30, 1975 for the Advisory Board of the University Wide Council on the Arts and the Empire administration. The report contained eleven recommendations. In fall 1975, the study was replicated in shorter form in keeping with the PERC requirement of using longitudinal data whenever possible. This led to a second report in March 1976 which reviewed the disposition of the recommendation.

The Studio Arts Semester Report: Findings

When the Office of Research and Evaluation began its study, it seemed quite possible that we were merely sliding the stone over a grave. There was much confusion in and outside of the College about the SAS. We heard about students floundering about and accomplishing little. Also, rumors of exorbitant cost were rife. We found some problems but the following was the major conclusion:

> Overall, we found the program stimulating and promising. The concept is exciting. The students are enthusiastic and serious. The faculty is committed. What problems that do exist are reparable. Thus, we enthusiastically recommend continuation of the Studio Arts Semester in New York City. (Palola and Bradley, 1975, Introduction).

However, there were other findings.

A key dimension of the SAS is the opportunity for top quality student artists to work closely and interact with other top students. Thus, student selection is important. While we found all students enthusiastic and serious, several people expressed the concern that quality was uneven. In addition, our conversations with students suggested that many had taken a lot of time getting comfortable in and therefore able to use the City. Thus, we recommend a strict screening process for students that included review of a portfolio. We also recommended a systematic, but not overly directive orientation program.

Problems also appeared in the critiques. Students found that the artist/critics tended to be highly subjective. As one student noted: "If your work is similar to the critic, he loves you. But if not, forget it!" While such subjectivity is a given in art, the apparent resulting disparity in amount of time spent with students is not a given in education. The disparities were heightened by the amount of work for an artist/critic in a given day. Thus, we recommended more visits and clearer distribution of their workload.

Another area of recommendation related to the SAS students, who were, save one, all primarily painters. Several, however, wanted introduction to other media and took courses and workshops in them. To stimulate opportunities f learning in other media, we recommended that students with other than painting interests be recruited.

Facilities of the SAS are three: the loft, the galleries and museums, and living accommodations. The loft is a 5000 square foot area which allows 100-150 square feet per student. Temporary partitions of plaster board separate the students' work spaces. While students seldom complained and even liked the loft, the critics did, noting: "New York is dingy enough. The students should have some way to get away from it." Another condemned the place as dirty, poorly lit, located in a high risk area, and generally unsuitable.

The second element of facilities, galleries and museums re, of course, incomparable. Students have easy access to a huge variety of learning resources. However, in the initial Studio Arts Semester, living accommodations were a serious problem. A few students found apartments, a few lived in the all-female Christian Union Building, but the six who chose the Hotel Albert - a cockroach infested, skidrow home for all manner of rogues - have the most to remember. The Hotel Albert is now immortalized in the loft graffiti for succeeding generations of students. Our recommendation under the facilities heading called for some tidying up of the loft, purchase of a few useful items -- electric saw for frames, a ladder, some more desks and chairs, a slop sink -- and a concerted effort identify suitable housing.

The cost analysis revealed a program that was somewhat more expensive than the normal Empire State College program. However, planned future enrollments would reverse this picture. Our recommendations were to look into extending the SAS, Empire's only semester program, throughout the summer since the Director is on year-

round appointment and the loft space is rented on an annual basis. We also suggested an evaluation of the fees going to artist/critics to ensure that the amounts were reasonable in terms of going rate.

A major problem for students and the Director was the lack of clarity over administrative procedures. The Director felt that he needed his budget earlier while students were suffering multiple problems in trying to pay tuition and fees and initiate transfers in financial aid monies. Our recommendation here was to straighten things out fast before these procedural problems destroyed the program.

A concern felt by the research staff was that several SAS students had no intention of returning to the home campus. Since the program is dependent upon the assistance and encouragement of art faculty throughout SUNY, this seemed a serious problem. Thus, our final recommendation was that considerable care must be taken to ensure that home campus art departments realize suitable benefits.

While there is nothing extraordinary about the initial Studio Arts Semester report (we, in fact, consider it fairly routine in the context of PERC), it provides a clear example of the advantages of a multiple perspectives strategy. Without multiple observers, several problems might never have been identified. Without multiple methods, we would have had great difficulty offering interpretations of the relative importance of the various recommendations. Similarly, multiple evaluators (with different standards) of the draft report helped make the final product powerful. Here are some observations from the second report (Palola and Bradley, 1976).

Impact of the Initial Studio Arts Semester Report.

The major impact of the initial report is that the SAS continues with generally enthusiastic support from Empire State College and the rest of the State University. While there are still concerns, all seem now convinced that the program is serious and productive.

The fall 1975 SAS was different from the spring in several ways. First, there

were more female students, more older students, and the artist/critics seemed to feel that the overall quality was higher. Second, the loft was more crowded as numbers increased. As one researcher found, it was a simple matter to trip on a painting or step on a tube of paint. Third, students acclimated to the City sooner. This was reflected in the number who made arrangements for activities outside the loft; apprenticeships, courses, work with tutors, and the like. Fourth, the critiques seemed to work better.

The Office of Research and Evaluation recommendations helped bring about some of these changes as seven of eleven were implemented. For example, a major reason for the quicker acclimatization was a thorough orientation program that included visits to all artist/critic studios. Several felt that this feature also helped make the critiques more helpful because "you could tell where they (the artist/critics) were coming from and interpret more easily." Another factor in the improved critiques was additional visits and use of a fixed schedule during the visits. This way, no one got left out while others received an hour's attention. However, it is always presumptious in research to claim that a report brought about great changes or helped save a program. Thus, we are a bit uncomfortable in suggesting such things. But what is clear is that the multiple perspectives strategy employed by this Office in looking at the Studio Arts Semester in New York City involved so many people in a variety of ways that the SAS became better understood. When decision time came, the various people and groups involved in the decision -- Empire's President, the Dean of ESC Center for Statewide Programs, the Advisory Board for the SUNY University-Wide Council on the Arts, the local art department liaisons -- all supported continuation.

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